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a significant force

SAGA OF THE COTTONWOOD

By Ernestine Gravley

Illustration by Paul Stone

Hardship was an accepted part of daily life as the early settlers of Western Oklahoma wrested themselves a living from the land, enduring the rigors of extreme heat and cold and the dust storms of the plains. Many were among the hordes of Easterners who pushed forward to settle the entire American West. Surprisingly, one native tree growing along the trails played a significant role in that settlement.

Cottonwood windbreaks were a welcome sight to many a weary traveler in the early days. The large handsome tree is now so commonplace that today, we may sometimes take it for granted. Not so the cattlemen, farmers, the sodbusters and town builders. They found it almost as vital to the westward trek as the streams along which it flourished.

Campfires of its branches roasted buffalo and wild game for many a hungry settler. Horses that might otherwise have starved survived on cottonwood bark.

The lightweight logs were sometimes lashed together with rawhide to form a raft for carrying belongings across swollen streams and rivers.

Easterners leaving the dense shade of their hardwood forests welcomed our tall stands of cottonwood promising relief from the flat, endless wastes, and rest for weary eyes nearly blinded by the shimmering heat of western plains.

Beneath its rustling, "rainy sounding" bright green leaves, the pioneer held protracted meetings to praise the Almighty for His care and keeping. Here he buried his dead, pronounced his marriage rites, camped with his sick, repaired his wagons. With good reason, he called the cottonwood by the name of a near relative, "balm of Gilead."

Chuckwagon cooks and dugout dwellers alike gathered the small, brittle branches swept off by strong winds across the flat plains. Twisted, knotted and dry as bleached bones, these cottonwood fragments burned brightly against the chill of bleak northers.

A cottonwood windbreak was often the difference between desolation and snug comfort on the wide prairies. One old timer tells of dragging about a bushel basket when he was a small boy, and of filling it with fallen cottonwood twigs for the wood stove in their prairie shanty. "I cracked sticks across my knee," he said. "The larger branches were propped against the tree trunks and battered to stove size with the heel of my hightops."

Gertie Stephens, who lived across the South Canadian from Shattuck in the small town of Durham, remembered the cottonwoods fondly. "I recall the cottonwood grove along a creek where we dragged the fallen limbs to our woodlot to be cut into stove lengths. All winter long, our indoor activity centered about that cozy little metal stove, studying our lessons by lamplight, visiting with neighbors and reading the Bible.

"The old stove heated bath water for the Saturday night scrubs before we climbed into long-handled underwear for the week. It burned mostly fallen cottonwood limbs or 'driftwood' washed up from the river. There we cooked great iron pots of beans, homemade hominy, bouncing popcorn, fresh pork backbones. It was where the diapers were boiled to a sanitary white brightness. It dried the laundry strung across makeshift lines from corner to corner and draped over the backs of cane-bottom straight chairs."

This too was a part of settling the wide spaces of Western Oklahoma. Children used the forked limbs of the cottonwood for "peashooters," and attached swings to the spreading branches of the tree. Pods of the cottonwood flowers made peashooter ammunition. Small girls found a variety of uses in their playhouses for the bright green cottonwood pod.

The cottonwood benefitted the Indians before the white man arrived. Plains tribes often structured their tepees upon cottonwood poles. Adobe hogans farther west sometimes had frameworks of cottonwood...about the only type of tree to be found. The inner bark was shredded to make Mojave skirts, and buckskin dresses were decorated with dyes made from cottonwood buds.

One historian recorded how Jedediah Smith, in 1827, built a breastwork of fallen cottonwood against the Mojaves on the Colorado River. "We made a weapon thus," Smith wrote. "We fastened our butcher knives with cords to the ends of the lightweight cottonwood poles to make a tolerable lance."

Army issue mules and Indian horses of George Custer lived on cottonwood bark during a clash with the savages along the Arkansas River in the winter war of 1868-69. "The pony," Custer wrote, "Accustomed to this kind of long forage, would place one forefoot on the limb...as a dog secures a bone..and gnaw bark from it."

Horse thieves and cattle rustlers frequently swung from cottonwood limbs in the early days, paying their debts to society. Ellie Watson, alias Cattle Kate, met her Maker one hot summer day in 1889 when a mob of masked homesteaders hanged her from a cottonwood near Steamboat Rock, along with her sidekick, Jim Averill.

The cottonwood (Populous canadensis) grows quickly and matures early. Its ease of propagation and rapid growth caused it to spring up all over the plains. Homesteaders once launched small prairie lumber businesses based on the cottonwood, but the tree is poor for lumber. It is soft, warps easily and becomes brittle when dry. Though poor for sawn lumber, cottonwood lent itself well to log construction.

A cottonwood ridge pole hauled from the bank of some nearby stream supported the roofs of most homestead sod houses. A less hardy tree might have been wiped out, but the prolific cottonwood grows from stumps and even fence posts. It grows more rapidly than does any other American tree.

Several generations who, in the pioneering drama, trekked across the

country and settled in Western Oklahoma followed the trail of the humble cottonwood. Without this tree the history of this state and nation might have been different. Beckoning the settler westward, it made a cool shade for the weary traveler. It supported his sod house, provided fodder for his animals, wood for his fires, logs for his dwellings, a windbreak against the cold...and beauty on the face of the land. ■

ERNESTINE GRAVLEY, co-founder of the OWFI and founder-director of Shawnee Writers, is a devoted supporter of and contributor to WESTVIEW.

praise

Driving to Kingfisher on a Summer's Morning

By Glen V. McIntyre

Wheatfields bow to the west wind,
two white cranes cross the trickling stream,
a single meadowlark sits and sings for its breakfast and
all the while,
shining on the horizon,
drenched in azure
the city wakes to golden sunlight,
towers of alabaster indefinite
in early morning light;
"We have often sung your praises
but we have not told the half."

Note: Last two lines taken from "Oklahoma A Toast," the first Oklahoma state song.

Western Oklahoma beauty

Cumulus Clouds

By Sheryl L. Nelms

a gallon of
rich
country cream

hand-whipped
into stiff
peaks

flung
from the beater

into dollops
across the blue oilcloth

SHERYL L. NELMS, now of Tucson, has roots in Kansas and South Dakota. She has the distinction of being the most prolific published poet of the OWFI.